

# ***IOWA OUTDOORS***

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

**[www.state.ia.us/government/dnr/index.html](http://www.state.ia.us/government/dnr/index.html)**

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**Jan. 7, 2003**

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**[Editor s Note: There is an eagle photo available electronically, send the photo request to [mick.klemesrud@dnr.state.ia.us](mailto:mick.klemesrud@dnr.state.ia.us)]**

## **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT AND MIDWINTER EAGLES**

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

They came. They saw. They counted.

Birdwatchers from across Iowa are tallying results for inclusion in the National Audubon Society's 103<sup>rd</sup> annual Christmas Bird Count. Across North America, Audubon says more than 55,000 volunteers took part in the longest continuously running wildlife survey in the world.

Though results are continent-wide, the counts are locally driven. Volunteers fan out across their neighborhoods to see, and hear, what's out there. "We saw 71 species this year; the fourth time in our 52 years of counting that we have gone above 70. Volunteers saw 11,500 birds in all," reports Chris Edwards, who compiles the Johnson County results.

Birders spread out in a 15-mile circle from a central location. Some stay out all day. Some concentrate on morning sightings. Others go to a specific area; woods, marsh or a river. Johnson County's 33 field watchers and 14 backyard monitors divided into teams, to cover 10 routes ranging from the Coralville Reservoir and Lake Macbride to Iowa City and Coralville on Dec. 15. Volunteers had from Dec. 14 to Jan. 4 to run their count. They also note weather, time spent in the field and other conditions.

"This year, we could see a lingering of migrant birds," notes Edwards. "The warmer weather has kept many birds here. They haven't been pushed south, yet. We did spot an ovenbird. That was the first time we have ever seen one on the Christmas count.

Two other rare cold-weather sightings were a turkey vulture and a gray catbird.” Though more common during nesting season in eastern Iowa, they should have migrated by now. On the other hand, the Iowa City area watchers saw no American robins, which are often seen through the winter.

Eagles held up well during the local count, with 96 listed, though some might have been tallied more than once. “Red-tailed hawks, eastern wild turkeys and redheaded woodpeckers also fell into the ‘above average’ range,” reports Edwards. “Ring-necked pheasants, American crows and cedar waxwings fell ‘below average’ in ’02.” He also notes that three winter species; the common redpoll, white-winged crossbill and the red crossbill haven’t been seen for several years locally.

By itself, a local count in one year doesn’t reveal too much. However, when combined with findings from 55,000 volunteers and when held up against totals of the last century, the Christmas Count helps biologists identify trends, problems or success stories in conservation efforts. Counts in the 1950s and ‘60s told of the sharp drop in bald eagles and peregrine falcons. Of special interest this year to researchers is whether any birds may be affected by West Nile Virus: “This year, West Nile Virus seems to have had a larger impact on U.S. bird populations than in years past,” said Audubon Senior Vice President for Science Frank Gill, in a posting on Audubon’s website. “Our volunteers’ efforts are vital if we are to understand the effects of this deadly bird epidemic.”

While the data is important, the social aspect is a big part of the count. Organizers meet a week before. Experienced birders are included on each ‘team’, with new birders always welcome. “We have a couple teenagers. The majority range from their 20s to their 60s,” estimates Edwards. “Some hike. Some view from the roadside. It depends on what people want to get out of it.” At the end of the day, they compare notes at a North Liberty restaurant.

And after a century, nationwide, and a half-century locally, they’ll do it all over again next year.

### **Surf the Web for More Birding Info**

Serious and novice birdwatchers can add to their birding fun and knowledge through a variety of websites. Among them;

National Audubon Society: [www.audubon.org/](http://www.audubon.org/)

Iowa City Bird Club: [www.jccniowa.org/~icbc](http://www.jccniowa.org/~icbc)

Iowa Ornithologists Union (IOU); [www.iowabirds.org/main/home.asp](http://www.iowabirds.org/main/home.asp)

There is also the IOU Birdline at 712-364-2863

### **Mild Winter Scatters Hawkeye State Eagles**

Mild weather has scattered wintering eagles in Iowa. That means opportunities to see a few birds in a far wider area, but less of a chance to see large numbers in historic winter hangouts.

“Our mild, open winter allows eagles to feed away from the rivers,” explains Department of Natural Resources wildlife supervisor Bob Dolan. “You can drive about anywhere in northeast Iowa and encounter eagles.” South central, southeast and northwest Iowa have seen numbers climb in the past few years.

Bald eagle numbers have rocketed in the last couple decades. Volunteers are wrapping up the midwinter eagle survey this month. Even with a mild winter, the count should be similar to last year, when more than 2,000 were tallied. On the way to Guttenberg a few days ago, I stopped four separate times to watch eagles. Two stood guard over the Wapsipinicon River dam at Anamosa. About a dozen were loafing in trees at midday, near a Dubuque County farm. Without leaving my car, I watched some of them from about 100 yards away.

In extreme cold, eagles concentrate around the few remaining pockets of open water. The tail-waters of the Mississippi River, and open areas below dams on larger interior rivers provide fish for cold weather feeding. When, or IF, a cold stretch comes, those should be prime locations again. “Go to the same places you’ve seen them in the past,” suggests DNR wildlife diversity biologist Bruce Ehresman. “If there has been a nest in the area, you are likely to see adult eagles around there.”

Those cold weather hot spots are usually for eagles that have migrated south. However, they mirror the surge in nesting eagles in Iowa, too. “We estimate there were 140 eagle nests in Iowa last year. We *know* of nests in 59 counties, but we feel they are in about 65,” says Ehresman. “That also means approximately 140 more young eagles, which is encouraging as we hope for a nest in almost every county by the year 2010.”

Nest building usually gets underway late in the winter, however, Ehresman says some activity could be underway now.

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## **2003 BALD EAGLE WATCH EVENTS**

by Bruce Ehresman

Wildlife Diversity Program Biologist

Iowa ranks as one of the most important wintering areas for bald eagles in the lower 48 states. As northern rivers and lakes freeze over, eagles fly south as far as they need to in order to find open water where they can catch fish. It is during this time of the year that approximately 2,000 bald eagles make Iowa their winter retreat. Most can be found concentrated in various size groups around open water areas; particularly near

locks and dams and stream riffles. The Mississippi River, in particular, supports from 2,500 to 5,500 bald eagles between St. Paul and St. Louis, and this is the most important river for Iowa's wintering eagles.

Winter is also the time of the year that Iowans celebrate this abundance of eagles by participating in one of the many Bald Eagle Appreciation Days' events held along some of our major rivers. Since 1985, these events have been held throughout the state with programs designed to allow people to both view eagles and learn more about them. Bald Eagle Days for 2003 are scheduled for the following locations and times. Please contact the person at the phone number listed for more specific information about the programs.

Clinton, Jan. 7, contact Jim Kelly (815-259-3628)  
Dubuque, Jan. 11, contact Wayne Buchholtz (563-556-0620)  
Quad Cities, Jan. 11-12, contact QCCA Expo Center (309-786-1477)  
Guttenberg, Jan. 18-19, contact Jean Curtis (563-252-4120)  
Bellevue, Jan. 19, contact Ann Burns (563-652-3783)  
Keokuk, Jan. 18-19, contact Tom Buckley (800-383-1219)  
Wapsi River EE Center, Feb. 1, contact Bob Bryant (563-843-2855)  
Red Rock Lake/Pella, Feb. 22, contact Tracy Spry (641-828-7522)  
Saylorville Lake, Feb. 23, contact Kelly Ulrick (515-276-4656)

Bald eagles can be seen wintering in Iowa from December through early March. Eagles perch in large trees (especially cottonwoods) close to the edge of open water, with early morning being a good time to view them feeding. Please remember to follow good eagle viewing etiquette and allow the bird the space it feels comfortable in. When possible, stay in your vehicle or stand behind a stationary object when viewing eagles. It is also good policy to view eagles from the opposite side of a river or lake to allow them a peaceful refuge. Happy eagle watching.

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## **NEAR RECORD WARM WEATHER UNWELCOME NEWS TO ICE ANGLERS**

DES MOINES – The warm and cold weather trends this winter is making ice conditions in many parts of Iowa unstable, and anglers venturing out to the frozen lakes and ponds should use extra caution. Even on the northern lakes, like West Okoboji and Five Island, there is some open water. With near record warm temperatures predicted for Tuesday and Wednesday, more lakes will lose ice and holes will open.

“It hasn’t been one of our better winters for ice fishing that’s for sure,” said Marion Conover, chief of the DNR’s fisheries bureau. “There is some good ice on some of our northern lakes, like Spirit, but I would be pretty careful going out on any lake.”

Even with the poor ice conditions in much of the state, there is some fishing activity. At Lake Cornelia, near Clarion, anglers have been catching 8 to 10-inch yellow perch. At West Okoboji, anglers have been catching some 7 to 9-inch bluegills in the bays. Anglers are still catching yellow bass at Clear Lake in the morning and evening, but the fishing has slowed. Perch fishing is variable at Spirit Lake, and there is quite a bit of fishing pressure. Anglers are also catching a few walleyes there.

Anglers are also having some success at Lake Catherine, near Forest City, Beeds Lake, near Hampton and Indian Lake at Eldred Sherwood Park, in Hancock County.

“There are places where anglers can go if they are willing to drive. Cold temperatures are predicted later this week, but what we really need is a sustained cold spell to make good quality ice,” Conover said. “Even on Clear Lake, the ice varies and there is a large amount of open water.”

Once a lake or pond skims over with ice, it doesn’t take long for that new ice to grow. But until the weather cooperates, ice fishing will be relegated to lakes in northern Iowa.

**For more information, contact Mick Klemesrud at 515-281-8653.**

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